

February 18, 2001

## Grand Canyon Plans Are Now in Limbo

By JOHN H. CUSHMAN Jr.

**B**Y litigation, by legislation and by referendum, plans to control the development and use of Grand Canyon National Park have been put on hold in recent months.

The plans — which affect visitor access to the main vantage points at the canyon's rim, air-tour companies, and construction of housing and hotels — are all part of a master plan for the park that has been under development for almost 10 years.

But it will be a few more months or possibly years before most of the plans take effect, and some could be overturned by opponents.

The most recent delay for the National Park Service came last month, when the Federal Aviation Administration bowed to objections from companies that conduct sightseeing tours in helicopters and small planes. These have long been a popular way to see the canyon, but there have been safety concerns after a series of crashes — including one involving a helicopter last April, in which seven people were injured — and complaints that aircraft noise impinges on the sense of wilderness in the park.

The F.A.A., with the strong support of the park service, had issued new rules to take effect last year, limiting where and how frequently the air tours could operate. The rules were intended to restore "natural quiet" to big sections of the park's back country. The tour operators challenged the rules in court, saying they were based on flawed studies and would wreck the industry, but failed to win a restraining order. Late last year, just before the limitations were to take effect, the operators presented a new objection to the F.A.A., saying that industry studies raised safety issues by suggesting that too many flights were being funneled into too little airspace in some corridors where the agency wanted flights restricted.

The agency has agreed to continue to examine the case for at least a few more months, although it has said it might put some of the restrictions in place this spring.

But the air tour operators are increasingly optimistic that they will prevail. Their litigation was pressed by the Mountain States Legal Foundation, a conservative legal advocacy group whose alumni include Gale A. Norton, the former attorney general of Colorado who is President Bush's new Interior secretary, and hence the new boss of the park service.

The Bush administration has pledged to review many environmental regulations proposed by the Clinton administration, and the industry is committed to persuading Ms. Norton to include the air-tour restrictions in any review, said Bill Summers, legislative director at the Helicopter Association International. Representative James V. Hansen, Republican of Utah, the new chairman of the House Resources Committee, which has jurisdiction over

the parks, included changing the proposed rules in a letter he wrote to President Bush recommending less stringent environmental rules.

Southwestern Republicans have also succeeded in putting on hold the park's ambitious plan to build an eight-and-a-half-mile light-rail system that would carry tourists to the park's South Rim and almost eliminate automobile traffic in that part, where roads have become extremely congested. The proposal, which would cost \$100 million to \$200 million, was approved by the park service in 1997, but just before bids were to be taken from contractors, Representative John Shadegg and Senator Jon Kyl, both Arizona Republicans, blocked it. They attached a rider to a spending bill demanding that the park service conduct more studies of alternatives first, such as the use of buses instead of trains. Mr. Shadegg has said that he's worried the plan will raise the cost of visiting the park too high for many people.

With a rail system or buses, the effect on most day visitors to the South Rim would be more or less the same. They would park at a distance from the rim and take mass transit to the sightseeing point, where the park has just opened a big visitors center. It's now unclear whether a rail system will be installed by 2004, if at all.

Even less certain are the prospects for a new gateway community, called Canyon Forest Village, that was to be built near Tusayan, south of the park. The 272-acre development would have provided thousands of homes for park workers, as well as hundreds of new hotel rooms for visitors and hundreds of thousands of square feet of commercial buildings. And it would have been the main transportation hub for people entering the park under the new mass transit plan. But in a local referendum on Nov. 7, the plan was resoundingly defeated by a margin of about 2 to 1. Business owners in nearby communities had argued that the development was not needed, citing hotel vacancies and slower growth recently in the number of visitors to the park.

Like so much else in the park managers' master plan, this project, too, is now back on the drawing board.